

Congregational Church of the Messiah

July 13, 2008

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”

Matthew 9:9-13

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One day Dear Abby received the following letter:

A young man from a famous family was about to graduate from high school. It was the custom in that affluent social circle for the parents to give the graduate an automobile.

Bill and his father had spent months looking at cars, and the week before graduation, they found the perfect car. Bill was certain that the car would be his on graduation night.

Imagine his disappointment when, on the eve of his graduation, Bill’s father handed him a gift-wrapped Bible!

Bill was so angry; he threw the Bible down and stormed out of the house. He and his father never saw each other again. It was the news of his father’s sudden death that brought Bill home again.

As he sat one night, going through his father’s possessions that he was to inherit, he came across the Bible his father had given him years before. He brushed away the dust and opened it to find a cashier’s check, dated the day of his graduation, in the exact amount of the car they had chosen together.”¹

Jesus often surprised people with good news. He invited himself to dinner with a tax collector when that was not the proper thing to do in his society. “Nice” Jews were not expected to eat with Jews who had become collectors of taxes for the foreign Roman government that occupied their country. Tax collectors were not considered very nice people.

However, neither things nor people are always what they look like on the outside. Jesus challenged many familiar customs of society and ways of applying faith. Jesus saw in Matthew, not just a “tax collector,” but an individual with ability and a divine spark placed within him just waiting to be called into action. Jesus knew Matthew was capable of much more than collecting taxes. When Jesus invited Himself to dinner at Matthew’s

¹ Canfield, Jack, Victor Hansen, Patty Aubery, and Nancy Mitchell. *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1997, page 154.

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house one night, Matthew became a disciple, a follower of Jesus, a living expression of God's love and compassion.

Jesus changed Matthew's life, and He can change our preconceptions about other people whom God loves just as much as God loves us.

I never thought I would enjoy being part of a gathering of 300 tax attorneys, but a few years ago, I was invited to join a gathering of the Taxation Section of the Los Angeles County Bar Association at the Biltmore Hotel. It was an event for the entire Los Angeles community of tax lawyers.

There were attorneys who specialized in federal tax laws, state tax law, county and municipal tax law, estate tax law and many more. One of those who spoke was a state judge who specialized in tax law, but the main speech was given by the Chief Justice of the State of California at the time.

Those tax lawyers had come together not to celebrate how great and important they were, but to honor one of their own, a brilliant tax lawyer, Bob Johnson, whose professional life was an example they admired for professional excellence, for improving the community and for living as an unassuming but exceptionally gifted human being.

That luncheon experience changed my opinion of tax attorneys.

Both Bob Johnson and his family were part of the Hollywood Congregational Church when I was minister there. Bob and his wife, Marilyn, were partially responsible for helping to change the way the Hollywood Congregational Church reached out to families in their neighborhood. They lived on Spring Oak Drive in the Hollywood Hills and had many friends with families who lived around them in the Hills.

They knew that families in the Hollywood Hills did not like to come back into the city on Sunday mornings *so* we took the church to them up in the Hollywood Hills. On Friday afternoons, the children came over to the Johnson's back yard, and I ran a mini Vacation Bible School program complete with relays, Bible stories, snack time and often craft projects. We even built a loft and raised homing pigeons in their back yard. Each kid adopted a bird to be his or her own and took care of it. Parents began staying after bringing their kids and talking over a cup of coffee while the activities continued outside. Friendships were started, which have continued over the last 35 years.

Those life experiences for the children and their parents would not have happened if the Church had not changed its way of reaching out to bring effective Bible adventures to the children and their parents, forging new and deep relationships.

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For this to happen we at the church had to change our view of where “church” would happen and focus on how to meet the inner needs of people and families beyond the visible separation that was so obvious and real.

Here in Westchester, major changes continue around the church. Those changes can separate Messiah as a Church from our new neighbors.

Yesterday, I watched as workers raised the large, brilliant copper dome for the new apartment complex at the corner of Manchester and Lincoln. Retail stores and over 580 apartment residents will soon be coming to live just a block away from where we are located. Each new resident will bring an array of gifts, interests, and a host of talent often mixed with spiritual concerns that may be unresolved.

Our challenge is to prepare to help meet the spiritual needs of these future neighbors who will be living in a new place within walking distance of our church.

Our Future Planning Committee has invited the public relations person for the apartment complex as our guest speaker in October. Terry Isaac has agreed to come and share with us the plans and timetable for opening the apartments.

Perhaps we could create some special ways to welcome the new tenants. We could hold a “Welcome to the Neighborhood” picnic on our front lawn some Sunday after worship to meet and greet our new neighbors in the condos across the street as well as those in the high-rise apartments. Maybe we could get a local restaurant to sponsor and cater the food to introduce its establishment to the residents.

Life on the west bluffs of Ballona Creek has changed. The remaining creek bed itself now is being covered by Playa Vista. That community projects over 40,000 residents, many parks, athletic fields, library, fire station *but not one church or house of worship*. Is there some way we could reach out and offer our wonderful Congregational Way of worship and service to that new growing community in the making? It is less than a mile away.

Those changes are taking place around us and have a major impact on us as well as our community as a whole

New relationships were a favorite part of Jesus’ teaching, and our scripture today makes that clear in three ways.

First, Jesus was willing to risk His reputation by going to dinner not only with tax collectors in a private home but also including other community people who were not approved by the synagogue religious leaders as having good reputations.

Second, Jesus pointed out that His own disciples did not need to keep all the fasts and man-made religious laws, especially about fasting on the Sabbath and other days.

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Third, the new exciting, dynamic relationship with God cannot be contained in old, static, unchangeable religious dogmas. Or as Jesus put it in Matthew's account of the Good News, no one puts new wine into old wineskins because the old wineskins will burst (they are already stretched to their limit with the old wine). But they put new wine into new wineskins so that both may be preserved. (Matthew 9:17)

Appropriate placement of wine results in the preserving of both the mature wine, which often is more valuable and rich than when it was new. Also new wine is saved by appropriately putting it into new wineskins, which will then expand, as the wine's ingredients become active, creating the best for everyone.

Our challenge is to hear the lessons Jesus offers us through that scripture in Matthew and find ways to live them in our lives.

When we invite others to dinner, we might even be inviting an Angel of God unawares and what a blessing that would be. In the church, this might mean including others in some new program, perhaps a Messiah Community Garden, some musical concert or other event here at the church.

As we learn more about what is in the Bible, we may discover kernels of truth that open up and reveal some wonderful truth about God's love for us that we did not realize before or had forgotten that it applies to us as well as to others.

We have restarted Televisionaries, our Tuesday morning 10:30-11:30 am lecture series on Great Personalities in the New Testament with a 30 minute presentation by an outstanding teacher and 30 minutes of discussion. No reservation needed.

Wednesday mornings we search in the Bible for background related to the upcoming Sunday's sermon topic. There is much to learn that goes behind what is finally shared in the actual sermon.

Summer is a great time to look into and try out for yourself some of these valuable opportunities to expand your knowledge and faith offered by your church.

Our scripture this morning tells us about a common situation that needed to change but did not change until someone came along and saw in an individual a quality and value others did not see. Jesus saw qualities in a tax collector other people did not see at all. Could this be true of you, a friend of ours, or me? Is God waiting for us to see in someone a quality or gift God has put within that person of which the person is unaware? Often others see in us something we do not see ourselves.

We at Messiah are dedicated to helping one another grow in our faith. Jesus helped Matthew grow in his faith. By deepening our faith, we can help others grow in their faith. God is not through with us yet.

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As Congregationalists, we are responsible for what our Church chooses to do or does not do. No one can tell us what to do or not to do, which is exactly the way we believe God wants us to be. The responsibility as well as the freedom is ours.

Sometimes opportunities present themselves; other times they are just waiting to happen. After church this morning, those interested in organizing a Messiah Community Garden are invited to come to the library. We will take a "field trip" outside the building and through the front parking lot on Manchester, and review the progress of clearing the ivy started by the AI-Anon on a workday held recently here at the church. Then we will return to the library to review steps to be taken to change the bed of ivy into working plots of land to be made into a garden.

If you are interested, either come yourself or send someone to get the information for you. This garden is still very much in its formative stage, and it may take weeks or months to gather all the facts. Progress is dependent on God's call and our willingness to follow. This new community garden can create a new and rewarding experience for everyone.

We are never the same after a visit from our Lord and Master.

Matthew was never the same after Jesus came to his house.

Sometimes trying to figure out things on a purely logical basis does not yield the right answer. It is like expecting Jesus to always act exactly the way old laws say a person should behave. Our parable today makes it perfectly clear; Jesus did not limit Himself or His disciples to just regular things. They were to heal and tell their story that God's Kingdom had come close to them that day.

God expects each of us who call ourselves Christian to share God's everlasting love as a normal part of each day.

"May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face and the rain fall soft upon your fields. And until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand." (Old Irish Blessing)

Amen.